

May 27, 2003

TO: Supervisor Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, Chair  
Supervisor Gloria Molina  
Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky  
Supervisor Don Knabe  
Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich

FROM: Marcia Mayeda  
Director

SUBJECT: Department Develops Canine Behavior Evaluations

The Department of Animal Care and Control has embarked on a positive new program to evaluate our dogs' temperaments in order to provide the best possible matches between our animals and their new homes. By conducting objective, standardized behavioral evaluations we will increase the successful placement of dogs into new homes, reduce the risk of placing temperamentally unsound animals into the community, identify behavioral problems that can be solved through modification and training, monitor dog behavior and stress in the animal shelter, reduce the return of adopted dogs, and reduce the average stay of adoptable dogs.

The behavioral assessment will help determine which dogs are suitable for placement into homes, and which type of home is suitable for each dog depending on its behavioral characteristics. Adoptable dogs are placed into three categories.

Level One dogs are highly sociable, have no aggression, are submissive but not fearful, do not guard resources such as toys or treats, and are easily handled. These dogs are best suited for inexperienced or first-time dog owners who do not have the knowledge, skill, or ability to manage a more demanding dog. These are the majority of our adopters.

Level Two dogs may be slightly timid or mouthy, have some identified problems such as low level separation anxiety, hyperactivity, some protectiveness around their food, or fear of other animals. These dogs are best placed in homes without children under the age of five, to avoid bites over food or toy guarding.

Level Three dogs are still adoptable but more challenging. They may be more dominant and more difficult to train, have high activity levels, or more complex behavioral issues. While still adoptable and friendly, these dogs are best placed in homes with experienced owners who can commit to formal training programs, and with no children under the age of twelve in the home.

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The dogs' temperaments are evaluated through a series of tests. The first test, the Food Bowl Exam, evaluates the dog's protectiveness over its food, toys, and treats. Since many bites occur over these objects, particularly against children, this test helps to determine how likely the dog is to be a "resource guarder". A dog with a high score in this area would not be placed with small children.

The Sociability Exam tests how attracted the dog is to humans. Social dogs are generally easier to train and are generally better animals to place with children in the home. The Body Handling Exam determines if a dog accepts handling that it has not initiated. This investigates the possibility of dominant aggression.

The Teeth Exam consists of the handler examining the dog's teeth. It determines how cooperative the dog is when asked to do something mildly unpleasant. The Hug Restraint tests the dog's reaction to close physical contact and how well it recovers and remains social after close contact with a person. The Dog to Dog Aggression Exam determines if the dog has serious aggression to other dogs. These animals present challenges to the average adopter and are difficult to be included in family life due to their aggressiveness, and cannot be placed in homes with other dogs.

This behavior assessment program was developed and taught to staff by Maureen Strenfel, a well-known animal behaviorist with over nine years' full-time experience conducting canine behavior evaluations for shelter dogs. Paid for by the Los Angeles County Animal Care Foundation, this new behavior evaluation program has increased staff and volunteer knowledge of dog behavior and enabled us to make better-informed suggestions to assist new owners in selecting a dog. By better knowing our dogs we will provide safer and more lasting adoptions for new pet owners.

We will be happy to give a demonstration of this evaluation program to you or any of your staff, or answer any questions you may have.

c: David E. Janssen, Chief Administrative Officer  
Violet Varona-Lukens, Executive Officer  
Chief Deputies  
Animal Control Deputies